

# Pioneer Tools



For the early 19th century Indiana pioneer, the forests where he moved were both a blessing and a curse. The dense growth of trees and underbrush were sometimes almost impenetrable and clearing the land was a seemingly never-ending chore. But it was also the forests that provided so much of what was needed. It was from the trees that he obtained logs for his home and the wood from which he fashioned tools, furniture, and other utensils necessary for frontier life. In the process, he acquired the ability to identify which kinds of wood were best for specific purposes and became skillful with a variety of tools.

To understand how important these tools were to the pioneer, we must know something about them and how they were used. Some of the more common tools are described here.

**Axe** - The axe was the most useful and valuable tool the pioneer owned. He could use it to clear the land, cut fuel, build a cabin, and, if necessary, protect himself. But not all axes were alike; their design was often dictated by their intended use. The felling axe, used to chop trees down, had a long straight handle and a knife edge on the bit that would cut into the tree's bark. The broad axe had a short bent handle protruding outward from the side of the axe head and a chisel point on the bit. With these two tools, the felling axe and the broad axe, a pioneer could make a round log into a square beam. To do so, he stood on top of the log and cut deep vertical cuts into it with the felling axe. He then walked along beside the log and, using the broad axe, "hewed" it into a square beam by chiseling away the sides. The bent handle made it possible to do this without smashing his fingers against the log.

**Hammers** - Because iron was a scarce commodity on the early frontier, and expensive when it could be found, many pioneers made their hammers from wood. Heavy hammers, used in driving wedges into logs for splitting, were called beetles or mauls. Sometimes these mauls were made from a single piece of wood taken from the trunk of a tree, usually a hickory, known for its hardness. One end would be left as a large "head," while the rest was shaped into a handle. Smaller hammers, called froe-clubs, were used to strike the knife-like wedge called a froe that was used to split shingles. They, too, were made entirely of wood.

**Adze** - The adze was a sharp tool with its blade at a right angle to the handle. It was used to smooth out rough surfaces, or to hollow out wooden bowls. Adzes had long or short handles depending upon their intended use.

**Froe** - The froe was a knife-like wedge of iron with a wooden handle set at a right angle. It was used to "rive" or split shingles. The pioneer struck it with a wooden froe club to drive it through a block of wood and split off thinner pieces that could be used as shingles.

**Drawknife** - It derived its name from the fact that the pioneer "drew" it toward himself. It was used to taper the sides of shingles, to rough-size the edges of floor boards and rough-trim paneling before planing them, to fashion axe, rake, and other tool handles, and to make stool legs, ox yokes, pump handles and wheel spokes. It was often used with a shaving horse which was a wooden seat that included a clamp block and a foot lever. A man sitting at the bench could push on the foot lever to clamp what he was working on under the block and hold it still.

---